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Depression among International Students

According to the recent statistics more and more young people want to get a foreign education. It is common knowledge that an education from abroad is more prestigious than an education that was received in home country. People think that studying abroad is not only receiving knowledge but it is also cultural exchanging between international student and foreign country. Student with an international diploma is considered more intelligent, because he or she sees people from other society with their customs, rules; student learns different language and travels. With this in mind, studying abroad is very preferable in nowadays. However, prestige is just one side of the learning process while abroad. Let us see a foreign land through an international student’s eyes. When international students get a great chance to study abroad they are very excited. Everything is new: people, culture, customs, and environment are not the same as at home. As a rule, an individual who enters a new cultural environment will face an adaptation experience because international student is a "stranger" in a host country and must accept at least some of the demands of new surroundings. Therefore, it is very hard to conform and a foreign student starts to receive different pre-warnings such as culture shock, homesickness, and problems in adjusting to foreign land that can lead to depression that affects the student’s studying process and makes his or her adaptation period harder.

Moving to another country usually causes culture shock. According to professor Gerald Wilson in the report of professor Ulla K. Bunz, “Too Far to go Home for the Weekend”, culture shock is defined “as a psychological reaction to the stress some people experience when they conform to culture very different from their own” (5). Foreign students possibly often do not recognize culture shock at first time, because they simply do not know that culture shock can exist. They experience various feelings in a different period of time. They are excited, amazed, pleased and positive in the beginning but later their perception rapidly changes to unpleasant. As professor Bunz explains in her study, stress is a normal reaction because culture shock has four stages that each international student will have to go through (4). Professor observes the first stage called “Honeymoon”. At this stage international students feel good in their new environment. Everything is pleasant and friendly; they do not criticize as it would be in a home country because all that they see excites them and overwhelms in a positive way (Bunz 5). For some international students this positive attitude can exist for couple of month. In addition, Bunz says that others could face the second stage right after they stepped to a strange land. The second is “Crisis Stage”. At this stage foreigners hate everything that surrounds them: other people, food, and even nature. They have mixed feeling like frustration, sadness, loneliness, and melancholy. International students start to think that they are not necessary and other people do not like them. Also they start to ask themselves questions like, “Why did I choose to study abroad?” and “Why did I exchange my home and friends for this awful country which I hate?” They see only one solution is to go back home (6). After a while they overcome this crisis situation because they understand that education is very important, and it was only their decision to go and study in a host country. As professor Bunz claims, changing their minds about returning back home transfers them to the next stage. The third stage is called “Recovery”. During this stage a foreigner is in the middle: he or she does not hate or love everything that surrounds his or her, as it was in previous two stages. In this stage a person has habits and visits familiar places. Their environment is not unknown anymore (7). In general, international students feel more comfort and confident. Professor concludes that there is a last stage called “Adjustment Stage”. This stage is more pleasant for foreigners. They have already found favorite places, get along with friends, and have adapted to a new country (Bunz 7). Everything seems to them stable and familiar. Each stage is very emotional and stressful for international students as they face culture shock, until the final stage when they adapt successfully.

The next problem that could lead to a deep depression is a strong sense of homesickness. According to an exploratory study of Senel Poyrazli and Marcos Damian Lopez in the article “Perceived Descrimination and Homesickness: a Comparison of International Students and American students”, being “homesick is a component of culture shock” (263). In addition, professors consider that homesickness is a main problem for students who come from other countries to America. It is normal to experience this reaction because foreign student changes an environment and everything is significantly unfamiliar (Poyarzli and Lopez 264). Being on distance with friends and family causes various negative feelings like anxiety, depression, insomnia and melancholy that could lead to more serious problems in studying and communicating with natives.

International students face the “shock” of cultural differences and experience “homesickness” but this is not the only one problem. There are other adjustment issues while international students attend a university in a new land. Professor Jennifer Robinson distinguishes two types of adjustment in her study called “International Students and American University Culture: Adjustment Issues”: “individualism and competition” and “equality and informality” (4,7). First, “individualism and competition” refers to American attitudes toward community and each other. As an example, she describes misunderstanding the American way of study by foreign students. Robinson concludes that Americans have a great sense of individualism and competition. They try to be active during class discussions and teachers even encourage students to compete and do their best by using a percentile curve. This evaluating system considered normal in American culture, but if there are students from communist countries they probably will be confused by this way of giving marks (Robinson 4). It is common knowledge that in Soviet culture, for example, the community is emphasized and placed above the individualism. In contrast, American students think and study on their own. The next example that Robinson supports the “individualism and competition” of adjustment is helping one another. In America, helping and giving answers to other students counts as a “cheating” because Americans relate only according to their sense of individual responsibility (6-7). For Soviet students not giving a homework to others is unusual aspect because they are brought up in a culture that expects everybody to share and help, even in studying. The secondt type of adjustment that international students consider hard to understand is called “equality and informality”. Professor Robinson says that American ideologically states that everybody is equal, and it emphisizes the friendly and opened relations between a teacher and a student. In contrast to American students, Soviet students are subordinate teachers and are required to call a teacher by his or her last name(8-9). This difference confuses foreign students and it takes them a long time to adapt to call teacher by first name. In addition, Americans prefer wearing casual clothes; it is also can lead to the resonance, because in Soviet countries formal style of clothes is required for all teachers and even for students. Moreover, in the United States it is considered normal for teacher to sit on a table and eat or drink during the lecture. For me, as an international student, it was quiet surprising when I saw a teacher wearing ripped jeans and eating a sandwich during his speech. It took me a long time to adapt to this completely different to my home country teacher’s behavior. Most international students experience the same feelings and when these two adjustment issues combining with other stresses that are received with homesickness and culture shock it is outgrowing in more serious consequences.

It is not surprising that students who feel homesick and other problems such us culture shock or problems in communicating with natives are more likely to receive low marks and lose interest to maintain their studying process. They start to communicate more with their relatives who are back home, and this cause the feeling of homesickness to become stronger and it can transform in more serious problem called depression.

Depression is an emotional and hard-to-overcome psychological state. It becomes a main obstacle in international student’s way of adapting to a strange country. Depression is a final “product” that can be “created” while foreign student suffers from different stresses caused by cultural shock and/or homesickness or facing miscommunication with the natives of the host country. In those cases, bad feelings are sharpened and it automatically makes a foreigner weaker and even damage his or her health. It can be compared to a snowball – if it is not stopped right away, it will build up bigger and bigger until it affects the student’s grades and make the adaptation period worse.

Even if most of international students experience depression, it can be reduced or prevented. In an article written by professor Lijuan Zhai, “Studying International Students: Adjustments Issues and Social Support”, it can be inferred that there are two ways to help nonnatives. The first solution is self – help, which is when students help themselves by sharing their emotional problems with relatives and friends (100). In addition, students prefer to get an advice from people from their own country because both from the same culture, speak the same language, and have the same issues (101). In co-operating with fellow nation, problems can be solved effectively and faster because common traditions and behavior allows international students feel more comfortable and relaxed. For example, national celebrations or cooking national dishes unites people and give a sense of family. This behavior is justified because we adapted to share psychological and our personal worries with people who are very close to us. It could be a family, friends and relatives. The second solution is student services provided by university, but students do not like to use them because they do not trust to people whom they do not know. Professor Zhai comments that:

Overall, OIE [Office of International Education] advisors were seen as helpful, caring, and knowledgeable by this group. However, all of the students indicated that they went to OIE for help with visas, traveling, legal problems, or financial difficulties… although OIE staff cared about international students and showed personal interest in them, they seemed very busy…and had no time to discuss personal concerns. Most of the students …stated that they were not aware of the availability of student counseling service. (100)

Again, it is obvious because I am an international student and I use our university student services only for issues that related to studying process. Refers to culture it is not appropriate for me to share problems with strangers who possible would not understand the nature of my problem. To avoid this prejudice, about student services universities should create some programs that could help international student be less nervous and more confident in general. These activities could be discussion clubs with native speakers or centers where cancelers will explain in more detail the unfamiliar culture to foreigners; also prior travel (visiting host country for a short time before actual studying) can be a very effective way of reducing adjustment problems. In Pheny Zhou Smith’s study prior travel is considered as a most efficient way in adapting to a strange country. He compares international students who visited country before actual studying with students who had never been to host country. First group had better experience and they were prepared for the new country, because they had already seen the environment, climate, and became familiar with history and people. In contrast, the second group had a high stress level after they arrived to unfamiliar environment for the first time (17). The result of this comparing is not surprising, because changes always need preparations.

Combining self-helping and students services will help reduce depression when it is occurred. It is extremely important to get through the cultural barriers and feeling of homesickness. Because some international students are scholars and it is well known that they are required to maintain a high GPA during the whole period of studying. In the worst case, they can be deprived of scholarships and deported back home. To avoid this way of going home it is better to use all of the resources provided by university and use one’s own strategies to make life and studying abroad easier.

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